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ABSTRACT

Among Indian groups of the Northwestern Plains (Blackfoot, Plains Cree, Dakota, Plains Ojibwa), older persons are respected for the spiritual power they have obtained. Differences exist between the several ethnic groups, but in general they assume that attainment of maturity and then old age proves spiritual power and makes the elder a proper model of behavior. Both men and women are respected for the spiritual power they embody, but different roads exist for the two sexes. Mrs. Winona Frank is an exemplar of the model Plains Cree woman, skilled in all womanly arts and spiritually powerful. Mrs. Frank's father, through a long apprenticeship, became a priest-healer. Mrs. Frank lived with and assisted her grandmother and became an apprentice herbalist and midwife, a role less prestigious than her father's; however, her status is acknowledged by her being seated with other elders within the Sun Dance lodge during the annual ceremony. Blackfoot women tend to be more fiercely independent than Cree women, to demand respect; the Blackfoot Sun Dance can be held only if a respected woman will serve as Holy Woman. Plains Indians see women and their activities as complementary to, rather than inferior or subordinate to, those of men. (MH)

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WOMEN'S LIFE COURSE IN NORTHERN PLAINS INDIAN SOCIETIES. ACHIEVING THE

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HONORED RANK OF OLD LADY

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Among the Indian groups of the Northwestern Plains -- Blackfoot, Plains Cree, Dakota, and Plains Ojibwa -- older persons are respected and feared for the spiritual power they have obtained, power demonstrated by the advanced age they have attained. It has recently become common for bands to formally designate these older persons "elders," and to record their words of wisdom. In one publication profiling such elders, a Plains Cree woman defined them thus: "'When you speak of an elderly man (Kisayinew), you speak of one who is religious, kind, courteous and helpful. When you speak of an elderly woman (Notokao), you speak of one who is able to do well inside a house, who is also spiritually aware, and who is knowledgeable in all the ways of womanhood" (Philips, Troff and Whitecalf 1976: Foreword). A Plains Cree man quoted in the same publication described male elders as men who in return for the honor shown them by their people, "prayed to the Creator and asked for blessing. Having done this, this brave would be asked by his people to pray and give a blessing at important events of his people like councils or ceremonials. Women did the same as this. The brave women also followed the belief of the oldest and strongest spiritual woman. These women were blessed by the Almighty to study womanhood and to bless and look upon all people" (Philips, Troff and Whitecalf 1976: Jim Kanneeptaytayo).

There are, of course, differences between the several ethnic groups among Northwestern Plains Indians, but in general, there is an assumption that the

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attainment of maturity and then old age proves spiritual power and makes the elder a proper model of behavior. This assumption strengthens the elderly to strive to be indeed a model of ideal behavior -- there are many autobiographical statements that mention, "I have given up drinking" -- and to readily expound native beliefs and moral principles. Fundamentally, both men and women are respected for the spiritual power they embody, but as the quotes indicate, in practical terms there are different roads, as the Indians say, for the two sexes.

the basic distinction is two-fold, younger adult vs. older, without middle age well defined -- (see Philips, Troff and Whitecalf 1976), I will describe Mrs. Winona Frank of Little Pine Reserve in the Battleford District, west Saskatchewan. I first met Mrs. Frank in 1962, when I was interviewing her father Piakwutch, the leading priest among the Battleford District Indians. At that time, Mrs. Frank was practicing as a herbalist, juggling her professional work with the care of a home that still included her sons. Piakwutch's wife had died while her children, Winona and her two brothers, were still young, and the children had been raised by their father's mother, a herbalist and midwife. This grandmother taught her profession to Winona. Winona's marriage had been unhappy: her husband gambled at cards, she says, and beat her when she complained that he wasted money that should have gone for his family. She bore six children, but only three survived infancy. Eventually she established a home with a man who loves her, but she has not formally married him. The income from her practice as a herbalist and midwife has been useful, although not much by Euroamerican standards. In addition to her maintenance of her own home, which in Indian style is sparsely furnished but is neat and clean, and her doctoring, Mrs. Frank tans hides, does porcupine quill embroidery and makes porcupine roaches, and can make birchbark baskets, although she seldom does so because the bark can be obtained only a considerable distance north of her reserve. These crafts bring in additional small income, sometimes in kind as when she tans two hides and keeps one as payment; she does not sell through the Battleford Indian Crafts

Shop, since her own contacts are sufficient to bring in as much as she wishes to handle. Mrs. Frank is thus an exemplar of the model Northern Plains Indian woman, skilled in all womanly arts and spiritually powerful. Her status is acknowledged by her being seated with other elders within the Sun Dance lodge during the annual ceremony.

If Mrs. Frank is recognized by her compatriots as a model for women, her career can also illustrate for anthropologists the typical pattern of a successful Plains Indian woman. Living with and assisting her grandmother, she learned from her the range of skills proper for a woman. Both Mrs. Frank and her brother describe this grandmother as an exemplary woman, always healthy and a "good worker." Indeed, the grandmother's name was Watoskeabun "Working Woman," and she lived to be nearly one hundred. Mrs. Frank describes herself during her marriage to her sons' father as endeavoring to maintain a good home against the difficulties resulting from her husband's profligate ways and bad temper. During this period, the 1930s and 1940s, Plains Cree reserves were isolated and offered little employment. Men worked at low wages for Eurocanadian farmers neighboring the reserves, worked as laborers on roads, cut and sold firewood, and fished and hunted for subsistence. Agents on the Canadian reserves were usually missionaries, and government and church together sought to root out native religion and cultural patterns. Traditional Indian avenues to prestige for men were blocked or severely attenuated, so that gambling and drinking were common, and many women suffered as did Mrs. Frank. Unlike many women with abusive husbands, Mrs. Frank felt confident that she could support her children herself, and separated from their father. She had intended to leave her children with her grandmother and seek employment in Alberta, where the sugarbeet industry regularly hired many Indians, but was persuaded to remain on her own reserve by her lover. Here, her knowledge as a herbalist and midwife, gained as apprentice to the well-respected Watoskeabun, would bring in sufficient

income to supplement what her man could provide. Her life at this time was hectic as she cared for her bright, lively, sons, her household chores, her man, continued her studies with her grandmother-teacher, and built up her own reputation with her part-time practice. When I met her toward the close of this period of her life, she impressed me strongly as presenting the same conflicts, problems, and excitement as other professional women with families. But as she entered middle age, her sons grown, household chores lessened, her practice solidly established, the stresses eased. At 60, she was still vigorous but no longer so constantly bustling about. She felt secure, in her profession after many years of successful practice, in her status in the community as a leading healer, a woman of knowledge, a woman whose abilities were amply attested to not only by her grateful patients and the products of her craft work, but also by the success of her sons, one of whom was chief of the reserve.

Comparing Mrs. Frank with her father Piakwutch, who attained a preeminent position also, the major difference between the careers of father and daughter is that Piakwutch as a young man was free to devote much longer periods of time to his apprenticeship to a priest-healer. He earned a relatively good income building log cabins on the reserves, and was able to support his family and still have enough money to purchase the obligatory gifts to his teachers. (Mrs. Frank similarly paid her grandmother for the knowledge she taught.) The rituals and purely spiritual healing Piakwutch learned required long periods of concentration, periods of time not available to one caring for children. Thus Mrs. Frank could not have followed her father's career, but, with abilities comparable to his, could only learn a profession that demanded no more than short periods of work that could be interrupted with child care. (Cf. Judith Brown, Am.Anth. 72:1073-78.) Both father and daughter put in long apprenticeships and became recognized practitioners only when entering the middle years of life, but the father's apprenticeship had been to the most prestigious role, priest-healer, and the daughter's to a less prestigious one, herbalist. The father devoted himself

full-time to his practice, spending hours in meditation and prayer to maintain his spiritual power, the daughter also worked at crafts as her pharmacy required fewer hours to replenish. The roles of father and daughter were comparable to those fathers who are doctors, and daughters who become nurses in Euroamerican society: because the daughter is expected to give priority to home and children in younger adulthood, she does not attempt the more arduous and prestigious course of study, and when in middle age she becomes free to devote herself to professional work, she is already locked into a less prestigious career.

Although the dichotomization between men's and women's careers among the Northwestern Plains Indians seems to resemble that in Euroamerican society, the fit is loose. Most importantly, the Plains Indians see women and their activities as complementary to, rather than inferior or subordinate to, those of men. Women have power, both political and spiritual — political power resting in part on the assumption of spiritual power attested by success in daily affairs. Women are believed to have more creative power, manifested through crafts as well as through children; men are dependent upon women's exercise of this creative ability. Men are in a sense weaker than women, because they lack this creative power; men must pray harder and more often, must strive harder. Piakwutch as maker of the Sun Dance had the most prestigious role in the society, but that did not make his daughter's work inferior, for the men's and women's roads are simply not identical, but parallel. Piakwutch had more spiritual power than anyone else in the district, but he had not the power to bear and nurse children, tan hides, do quill embroidery. Men and women have each their road, and each road can end in the achievement of spiritual power and public respect.

The pattern I have described for the Plains Cree is similar for the Plains Ojibwa and the Dakota, but the Blackfoot make the woman's road the more powerful. The Blackfoot Sun Dance requires a priestess, not a male priest: it can be held only if a respected woman will vow to serve as Holy Woman. This office reflects

a basic theme in Blackfoot cosmology, that the mediation of women is essential in all dealings between men and the Holy. Thus it was through women that the major medicine bundles, including the Beaver Bundle and the Thunder Pipe as well as the Natoas bundle of the Sun Dance, came to the people. Women are the custodians of the bundles, and only women unwrap and rewrap them. Blackfoot, like the Plains Cree, believe that only women can carry out homemaking and its associated crafts, and the Blackfoot explain this through a myth describing the primordial camp, in which women enjoyed a civilized life while men, who lived separately, were without properly prepared food, clothing, or shelter. Blackfoot women tend to be more fiercely independent than Cree women, to demand respect. (Blackfoot men say they like Cree wives, because Cree women are prettier and more docile. Blackfoot women fight, and fight hard.) A successful Blackfoot woman, such as Mollie Kickingwoman, like Mrs. Frank is admired as mistress of all the womanly crafts. Mrs. Kickingwoman, however, is herself owner of a Thunder Pipe bundle, a bundle that had been her mother's. Mrs. Kickingwoman requires a man to lead the prayers of the Pipe ceremony, but the man depends upon her, or another woman, to handle the bundle. The roles of men and women among the Blackfoot are complementary, but less parallel, more intertwining than among the Cree. The outline of a Blackfoot woman's career, like that of a Cree, would include a young womanhood juggling home and childcare with apprenticeship and part-time practice, then a middle age of less harassment, with substantial time devoted to exercise of her craft or profession. The pinnacle for the Blackfoot woman, however, can be the most prestigious role in her society, Holy Woman of the Sun Dance, and the rank of Old Lady is the dominant rank in the society.

Reference: Philips, Donna, Robert Troff and Harvey Whitecalf, 1976, Kataayuk: Saskatchewan Indian Elders. Saskatoon: Saskatchewan Indian Cultural College.